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THE ARTISTIC DECORATION OF CLOTH BOOK-COVERS.

BY GLEESON WHITE, IN *The Studio*.

O describe the best of the cloth covers stamped with gold, in which the majority of English books are issued to the public, in a phrase exact and yet not deprecatory, is somewhat difficult. "Commercial book-binding" includes too much, "in cloth extra gilt" promises too little, for some of the most hideous covers ever produced are thus technically described.

"Cloth book-binding" is not quite happy, nor quite correct:

first, because the word cloth conveys to the public the idea of a textile quite unlike the stiffened calico^o used for these cases; and secondly, because the cover is not a true binding. A really good, permanent binding, with the sheets carefully sewn to cords firmly inserted in the books, and covered by some tough, flexible material, will withstand the wear of centuries. A modern cloth binding will scarcely survive six months' hard usage in a circulating library. Does one of these books incur a sudden fall—its cover is sent flying away from the contents, and stands revealed a mere sham—a portfolio of cardboard and calico—barely attached to the sheets; which are in turn all supported by each other, or, still worse, wired on to some fabric, instead of being securely lashed to strong cords, or bands, as a book must needs be ere it can be said to be "bound."

Here, however, we are not concerned with what should be, but with what is. Commerce demands that the majority of English books shall be issued in ephemeral covers; which, after all, survive the real working life of the book itself in most instances. The French, on the other hand, still preserve the tradition that a book is only issued "in sheets," stitched temporarily together, it is true, for convenience of distribution, and enclosed within a wrapper that bears the title of the work, and keeps the end pages clean. For a French publisher recognizes that the true binding of a book should be added at the owner's pleasure. Instead of pointing to a contempt for appearances, as a very easily damaged paper cover would first imply, this system accords with the true spirit of the book-lover, who deems such purchases as are worth re-perusal fit to bear his own livery, and to take their place on the shelves of his library either in the modest *demi-toilette* of leather back and marbled paper sides, or in the state costume of full morocco, richly gilt, with the *super-libros* of his coat-of-arms, or monogram, emblazoned on their sides. Here, however, we mostly "hire" books, and so demand merely a binding that will last while the brief popularity of the book attracts readers; indeed, apart from volumes that find a place in public libraries, the copies of any book that are ultimately bound as a book should be, form a very small percentage of its edition.

Taste should demand of a pattern that it decorates the book—wisely and not too well. It is absurd to see a Sunday-school story emblazoned in gold and colors, like a missal of an empress; especially when all this splendor is Dutch metal and cheap pigments, ungraceful often enough in the forms, and calculated to become shabby under a very small amount of wear. Next, it is obviously desirable that some fitness of the

design to the subject of the book should be borne in mind. Certain modest conventional ornament may be so unobtrusive that you would not object to the most diverse book—in such a series as that of Bohn's (already referred to), with its seven hundred volumes of history and fiction, theology and science, all wearing the same dress. But when you find a garish decoration, in the style of a grocer's almanac, adorning, say, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Pepys' Diary*, *The Koran*, *Gil Blas*, *Andersen's Fairy Tales*, it is clear no lover of either one, much less of all five, could tolerate a design prostituted to such different purposes. Fortunately within the last few years it has been the custom to offer an alternative binding of plain dark cloth, with a paper label or gold lettering, for those whose tastes are educated, even if their lack of money will only allow them to indulge in cheap editions. When cheap books were thus redeemed, the better class of publishers sought refuge in absence of ornament, and issued their volumes in perfect taste, if in somewhat monotonous garb.

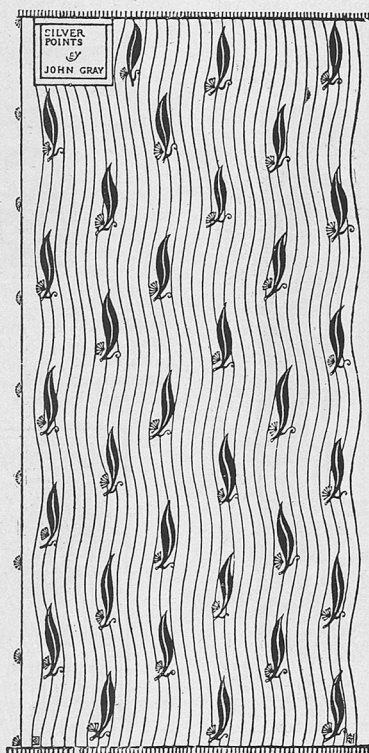
But good as simplicity is, it demands lasting materials; and plain cloth, especially in the smooth varieties, is ruined by an accidental drop of water, or even the rubbing against other volumes; not to speak of the fading of fugitive pigments too often used in its preparation. Hence an added decoration may not merely adorn, but help to preserve, the appearance of a book.

Soon after this reaction in favor of simplicity, a few volumes began to appear with covers designed by artists for the individual book. Heretofore the ordinary practice had been for the publisher's binder to obtain a certain number of so-called designs—jumbles of ill-assorted ornament for the most part—and to offer them to the publisher, who chose at random something that seemed striking or economical.

The novelty attracted buyers and rapidly became more general, so that to-day, although the average shop window still exhibits a mass of commonplace patterns, it contains also, as a rule, a fair number of really excellent designs. America, if it did not actually lead the way in this, did good service. Some of the most dainty modern covers owe their origin to the houses of Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Roberts Brothers, and Charles Scribner's Sons. But at the same time the palm for depravity must also be awarded to the United States. After much consideration a volume of "really beautiful poems," entitled *A Masque of Death*, deserves description as an awful example. White vellum cloth, the most dainty of all available materials, is there vulgarized by an atrocious design in blue and gold. This includes a portrait in outline of a bride, within a panel, surrounded by a wreath, which the artist(?) probably intended for forget-me-nots, with a glittering gold background.

"THE" (in Gothic lettering) followed by "MASQUE OF DEATH," in American-Roman characters, is inscribed on a bent scroll in gold letters shaded with blue. Aiming to be cultured and artistic, it falls the deeper; for while no one takes the cover of a vulgar brochure too seriously, a book of really fine verse in a comparatively expensive cover must be judged by a higher standard. Compare this with the elaborate design for Mr. Oscar Wilde's *Poems*, by Mr. Charles Ricketts—with the same artist's dainty fancy for *Silver-points*—thin lines of silvery gold, upon a pale green ground; or with many other books of poems issued by publishers on both sides of the Atlantic, and the difference becomes plain even to the most heedless person.

To take another instance from America, it is only fair to say that for sumptuous binding, exquisite in color and design, a volume, *A Mosaic*, published by Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia, has hardly been excelled. On white, smooth cloth, the design,



DESIGNED BY JOHN GRAY.

of graceful classic detail, is stamped in gold, silver, and delicate shades of blue, pink, and primrose; the whole being like fine goldsmith's work, set with jewels, decorating the space superbly, yet scarcely occupying one-sixteenth, perhaps not a thirty-second, square part of the surface.

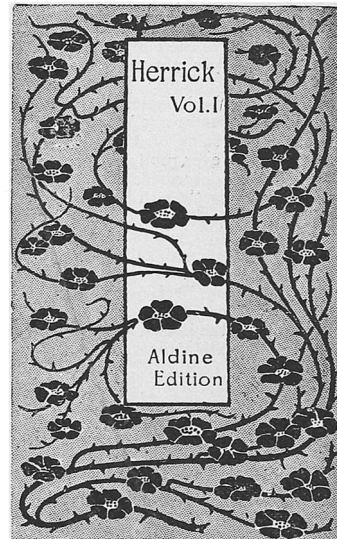
Another factor has worked for good in the modern cloth binding. In early days a die must needs be cut in brass at a great cost; if several metals or colors were needed in the design, a die for each was necessary. Now photography steps in, and the block of metal, once costing pounds, may be estimated in shillings. For really fine work the old method is still employed; but for bolder work, where extreme nicety is of secondary importance, the ordinary process-block answers fairly well.

The points to be aimed at in designing an appropriate cover are many. Here we can only indicate a few. 1. Fitness of the design to the book. This opens up a vast subject; indeed, to discuss it adequately would be to raise the whole question of suitability of ornament. So large it is, that here it must be left to the good taste of the designer, for no advice will avail if the hearer lacks the instinct of good taste. But even then the difficulty of escaping too obvious hackneyed symbolism, and yet avoiding abstract allusions which need a handbook for their elucidation, remains to be faced.

2. The size and style of the lettering. This should be a matter capable of being reduced to formal rule; yet in no respect

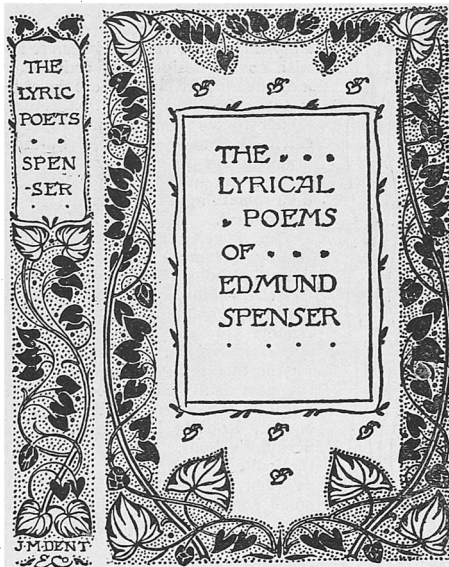
old inscriptions, may be permitted, when an artist employs them; but to do so needs great knowledge.

3. The proportions of the detail to the surface. This is not so easily settled, yet to-day, when the bookbinders employ fabrics, some as smooth as polished calf, others as rough as coarse



DESIGNED BY GLEESON WHITE.

sackcloth, it is plain that the pattern should be planned for the fabric, or the fabric chosen for the pattern, since if either fail to harmonize, it would spoil the effect of the decoration. The symmetry of the whole design is also a thing not to be explained in words, yet it is of enormous importance. As a



DESIGNED BY H. GRANVILLE FELL.

is offense more frequent many of the best modern covers are not free from affectation and a striving after quaintness. Obviously a title should be readable at a glance; therefore it is best not to break words in absurd syllables. Nor need the title be so large that it is visible across a room, or so mixed up with the design that it offers a puzzle problem to a spectator.

To advise that the lettering, whatever style be chosen, should be kept to the same "font" throughout, reads as an axiom. Yet hardly one per cent. of modern book-covers—or title-pages, either, for that matter—observe this rule. The terrible vulgarities of so-called "rustic" lettering are almost matched by the eccentric shapes in vogue to-day, which outvie the fecund products of the American advertiser in their grotesque extravagance. Be it Gothic or German, Georgian or Old French, it is well that, beyond the variety obtained by the use of capitals of different sizes, uniformity should be preserved. Italics rarely come well on covers, unless, indeed, a written character, as distinct from a printed one, is observed throughout. All so-called "fancy" letters should be shunned. Really fanciful letters—such as Mr. E. A. Abbey employs—or even the deliberately "quaint" characters that have precedents on

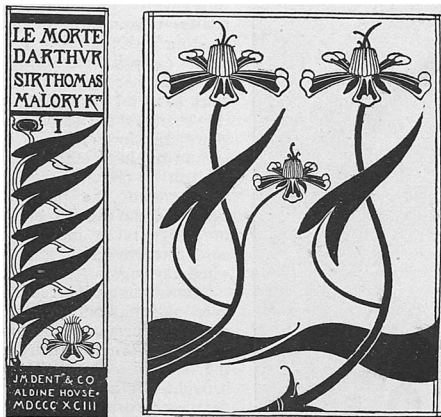


DESIGNED BY SELWYN IMAGE.

rule, not enough margin is allowed, the backs are too "spotty," and the broad masses of plain surface—or some regularly recurring diaper, or interlaced pattern—not sufficiently considered.

In planning the colors, gold is first and best; since platinum has come into use, silver, once banned owing to its rapid

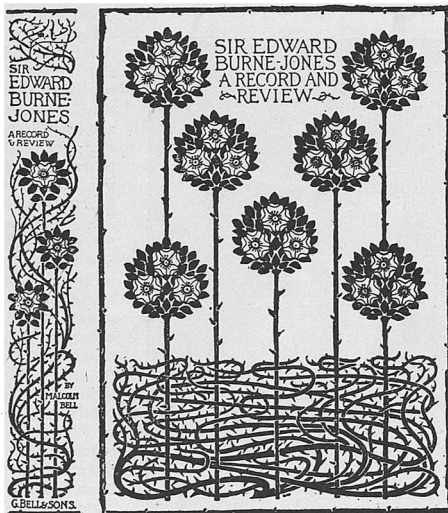
oxidization by exposure, may now be trusted to stand well. In certain cases a mixture of red gold with silver may be employed happily. Black, as a rule, looks cheap, and its varnished surface ill accords with the dull texture of the cloth. Bright colors on dark cloth are rarely satisfactory.



DESIGNED BY AUBREY BEARDSLEY.

The cloth with a broken color, so popular to-day, is obtained by using the back of the fabric. In this way crude orange cloth may yield a delicate salmon, a staring red may supply a dainty flesh-color, or a strong blue yield a cool grayish blue. The white threads of the fabric, having only taken the color in their interstices, the effects of the back is that of a woven, not of a painted, fabric. The old-fashioned cloths—grained to imitate leather, with heavy opaque colors—are not in favor to-day, nor are those with arbitrary patterns impressed in the material before it is fixed to the millboard of the covers.

Of the designs that are shown to illustrate this paper nothing could here be set down except praise. First, because they mostly deserve it; secondly, because if they left points open to



DESIGNED BY GLEESON WHITE.

objection it would rather be ungenerous to apply a drastic criticism to examples lent us as specimens to illustrate the improvement of the cloth cover. Nearly all are planned for gold upon color. Mr. Selwyn Image's design—executed in red gold upon vellum—for the large paper edition of *The Tragic Mary*, was

also issued in black on brown paper for ordinary copies, and it is difficult to say in which form it was most charming. *The Sphinx* is designed for gold upon vellum; *Silver-points* I have already mentioned. The cover of *Sir Edward Burne-Jones* is in pale blue upon a still lighter cloth; the *Herrick* is in gold upon colored cloth, with vellum panel. The rest are intended either for gold on modestly light cloths, or for printing in a darker shade upon the fabric. For nearly all these cases quiet tertiary colors are used, mostly on the back of the cloth before described.

To-day is essentially a time when mean things are done so finely that future ages may refer to it as a period when the minor arts attracted the genius and energy now—from modesty or timidity—diverted from heroic enterprises. So as we collect the bric-a-brac of certain periods, and pay thousands for a piece of porcelain or some other article of the craftsman's production, it may be other ages will pass by our pictures and poems with a smile of contempt, and collect our book-covers, our short stories, and a hundred ephemeral products, with keen interest.



DESIGNED BY CHARLES RICKETTS.

DECORATIVE NOTES.

ENTERING from the main hall into the dining-room of one of the most artistically finished residences of Newport, R. I., the first feature to attract the eye is the large old-fashioned fireplace of stone, richly carved, and with hooded roof of Carlsle stone. Cut in the face of the roof are the Toker arms. A very important feature, from its magnificence and antiquity, is the buffet. This is made from a screen taken from an old monastery in Brittany during the fifteenth century, and shows elaborate designs in carving, the work of the monks. It is fourteen feet long. On one side of the buffet is the silver safe; and in front of it, flush with the wainscoting, are solid brass gates, also the work of the monks. The windows of the room are all of the same height with the wainscoting, and are a mass of jeweled bull's-eyes, chipped off for lustrous effect, and with an oval plate-glass in the upper part of the window.

THE ceiling is oak timbered. In the corners of the room are niches for china and glassware. The pilasters on the side show crabs carved in relief; and the columns in the wainscoting, crests, fleur-de-lis and shells. Above the wainscoting the wall is covered in Spanish leather. The room is rich in carving; and to preserve the feeling of antiquity in its furnishing, a screen for the fireplace has been made of panels of sun-burnt wood, taken from the front of a Cairo house, and adding not a little to the general effect.

LEADING from the dining-room, through arches on either side of the fireplace, by means of gates copied after the pattern of the old gates used in front of the safe, we enter the salon. Here the walls are covered with yellow silk up to the frieze, which is composed of heavily embroidered silk of a very rich pattern, and the entire finishing points to the Louis XVI. style. Over the fireplace is a mantel of cherry, with figures carved in relief around a central mirror.